# High-School Sports Aren't Killing Academics

[Daniel H. Bowen and Collin Hitt](http://m.theatlantic.com/daniel-h-bowen-collin-hitt/) Oct 2 2013

Schools in Massachusetts provide sports programs while schools in Finland do not. Schools in Mississippi may love football while in Tobago interscholastic sports are nowhere near as prominent. Sports cannot explain these similarities in performance. They can’t explain international differences either.

If it is true that sports undermine the academic mission of American schools, we would expect to see a negative relationship between the commitment to athletics and academic achievement. However, the University of Arkansas’s [Daniel H. Bowen and Jay P. Greene](http://www.eeraonline.org/journal/files/v22/JRE_v22n2_Article_1_Bowen.pdf) actually find the opposite. They examine this relationship by analyzing schools’ sports winning percentages as well as student-athletic participation rates compared to graduation rates and standardized test score achievement over a five-year period for all public high schools in Ohio. Controlling for student poverty levels, demographics, and district financial resources, both measures of a school’s commitment to athletics are significantly, positively related to lower dropout rates as well as higher test scores.

On-the-field success and high participation in sports is not random--it requires focus and dedication to athletics. One might think this would lead schools obsessed with winning to deemphasize academics. Bowen and Greene’s results contradict that argument. A likely explanation for this seemingly counterintuitive result is that success in sports programs actually facilitates or reflects greater social capital within a school’s community.

Ripley cites the writings of renowned sociologist James Coleman, whose research in education was groundbreaking. Coleman in his early work held athletics in contempt, arguing that they crowded out schools’ academic missions. Ripley quotes his 1961 study, The Adolescent Society, where Coleman writes, “Altogether, the trophy case would suggest to the innocent visitor that he was entering an athletic club, not an educational institution."

However, in later research he would show how the success of schools is highly dependent on what he termed social capital, “the norms, the social

In this month’s Atlantic cover article, “[The Case Against High-School Sports](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/10/the-case-against-high-school-sports/309447/),” Amanda Ripley argues that school-sponsored sports programs should be seriously curtailed. She writes that, unlike most countries that outperform the United States on international assessments, American schools put too much of an emphasis on athletics. “Sports are embedded in American schools in a way they are not almost anywhere else,” she writes, “Yet this difference hardly ever comes up in domestic debates about America’s international mediocrity in education.”

American student-athletes reap many benefits from participating in sports, but the costs to the schools could outweigh their benefits, she argues. In particular,  Ripley contends that sports crowd out the academic missions of schools: America should learn from South Korea and Finland and every other country in the top tier of international test scores, all of whom emphasize athletics far less in school. “Even in eighth grade, American kids spend more than twice the time Korean kids spend playing sports," she writes, citing a 2010 study published in the Journal of Advanced Academics.

It might well be true that sports are far more ingrained in American high schools than in other countries. But our reading of international test scores finds no support for the argument against school athletics. Indeed, our own research and that of others leads us to make the opposite case. School-sponsored sports appear to provide benefits that seem to increase, not detract from, academic success.

Ripley indulges a popular obsession with international test score comparisons, which show wide and frightening gaps between the United States and other countries. She ignores, however, the fact that states vary at least as much in test scores as do developed countries. [A 2011 report from Harvard University](http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_20114_Peterson_fig1.gif) shows that Massachusetts produces math scores comparable to South Korea and Finland, while Mississippi scores are closer to Trinidad and Tobago. Ripley’s thesis about sports falls apart in light of this fact.

oversubscribed and participation was determined by lottery. [According to a 2013 evaluation](http://home.uchicago.edu/%7Esbheller/UC_Site/Welcome_files/Heller%20et%20al%20draft%2020130425.pdf) conducted by the Crime Lab at the University of Chicago, Becoming a Man--Sports Edition creates lasting improvements in the boys’ study habits and grade point averages. During the first year of the program, students were found to be less likely to transfer schools or be engaged in violent crime. A year after the program, participants were less likely to have had an encounter with the juvenile justice system.

If school-sponsored sports were completely eliminated tomorrow, many American students would still have opportunities to participate in organized athletics elsewhere, much like they do in countries such as Finland, Germany, and South Korea. The same is not certain when it comes to students from more disadvantaged backgrounds. In an overview of the research on non-school based after-school programs, [Gardner, Roth, and Brooks-Gunn](http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_after-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf) find that disadvantaged children participate in these programs at significantly lower rates. They find that low-income students have less access due to challenges with regard to transportation, non-nominal fees, and off-campus safety. Therefore, reducing or eliminating these opportunities would most likely deprive disadvantaged students of the benefits from athletic participation, not least of which is the opportunity to interact with positive role models outside of regular school hours.

Another unfounded criticism that Ripley makes is bringing up the stereotype that athletic coaches are typically lousy classroom teachers. “American principals, unlike the vast majority of principals around the world, make many hiring decisions with their sports teams in mind—a calculus that does not always end well for students,” she writes. Educators who seek employment at schools primarily for the purpose of coaching are likely to shirk teaching responsibilities, the argument goes. Moreover, even in the cases where the employee is a teacher first and athletic coach second, the additional responsibilities that come with coaching likely come at the expense of time otherwise spent on planning, grading, and communicating with parents and guardians.

The data, however, do not seem to confirm this stereotype. In the most rigorous study on the classroom results of high school coaches, the University of Arkansas’s [Anna Egalite, Daniel Bowen, and Julie Trivitt](http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Egalite-Bowen-Trivitt-Athletic-Coaches_wp.pdf) find that athletic coaches in Florida

networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child’s growing up.”

[Coleman finds](http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/1175544?uid=3739256&uid=2&uid=4&sid=21102706368917) that social capital is highly predictive of academic success. He comes to this conclusion after conducting substantial research on the remarkably low dropout rates at religious private schools. “After extensive investigation,” he and his colleagues Thomas Hoffer and Sally Kilgore conclude that the private-school effect “was not the result of greater curricular demands or anything else within the school, but was due to a different relation of the school to the parental community.” He concludes that it is weekly gatherings for religious services that facilitate increases in social capital. Although Coleman never studies sports from this aspect, we believe school-sponsored sporting events provide a secularized equivalent to these weekly, religious gatherings.

These events provide venues for parents, students, and teachers to come together, providing opportunities for increasing social capital. The research results from Ohio suggest that these venues bolster, rather than deter, academic missions.

Of course correlation does not imply causation. It might be that schools with well-run athletic programs benefit from superior leadership that also fosters better academic results. Or, put differently, schools that tend to be successful in one venue are often successful in others. Much more research is certainly needed on the topic, but we theorize that sports can in fact reinforce the missions of schools in ways that potentially help, not harm, academic achievement.

The need to build trust and social capital is even more essential when schools are serving disadvantaged and at-risk students. Perhaps the most promising empirical evidence on this point comes from a Chicago program called [Becoming A Man--Sports Edition](http://www.youth-guidance.org/our-programs/b-a-m-becoming-a-man/). In this program, at-risk male students are assigned for a year to counselors and athletic coaches who double as male role models. In this partnership between Chicago Public Schools, Youth Guidance, and World Sport Chicago, sports are used to form bonds between the boys and their mentors and to teach self-control. The usual ball and basket sports are sometimes played, but participants are also trained in violent sports like boxing at school.

Chicago researchers were able to conduct a gold-standard evaluation because the program was

mostly tend to perform just as well as their non-coaching counterparts, with respect to raising student test scores. We do not doubt that teachers who also coach face serious tradeoffs that likely come at the expense of time they could dedicate to their academic obligations. However, as with sporting events, athletic coaches gain additional opportunities for communicating and serving as mentors that potentially help students succeed and make up for the costs of coaching commitments.

If schools allow student-athletes to regularly miss out on instructional time for the sake of traveling to athletic competitions, that’s bad. However, such issues would be better addressed by changing school and state policies with regard to the scheduling of sporting events as opposed to outright elimination. If the empirical evidence points to anything, it points towards school-sponsored sports providing assets that are well worth the costs.

Despite negative stereotypes about sports culture and Ripley’s presumption that academics and athletics are at odds with one another, we believe that the greater body of evidence shows that school-sponsored sports programs appear to benefit students. Successes on the playing field can carry over to the classroom and vice versa. More importantly, finding ways to increase school communities’ social capital is imperative to the success of the school as a whole, not just the athletes. •

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